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Kennedy says he'll seek additional funds for Truancy Court

By TIM GRACE
Times staff reporter

PAWTUCKET — Sara, a slight, 12-year-old girl with brown hair falling past her shoulders and a nervous smile, shifted her weight from foot to foot and put a hand to her face.

Her eyes slid from the floor, to the audience, to her mother who was seated on her left, looking everywhere except at a spot six feet in front of her where a magistrate, complete with black robe and serious expression, was waiting for her to explain why she'd not been doing her homework for the last week.

Sara was one of 42 students from Jenks, Goff and Slater Junior high schools to appear in Truancy Court Wednesday morning.

Up and running for the last 18 months, the Truancy Court operates under the authority of the Rhode Island Family Court. The program was designed as a kind of safety net for students who otherwise might, due to habitual absenteeism or tardiness, drift out of the educational system and, as frequently happens, into the family or criminal courts.

On Wednesday, Rhode Island Family Court Chief Judge Jeremiah Jeremiah and Truancy Court Magistrate Angela Buccipaulhus allowed U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy to observe the court in session, hoping to demonstrate how the program helps to pull students who might have missed as much as half of the school year back into the classroom and, in some cases, all the way up to the honor roll.

Addressing a small crowd of

public officials and reporters before the start of the session, Jeremiah touted the program's success.

"The response to this court has been tremendous," he said.

Along with halving the level of truancy in the municipalities where it operates, Jeremiah credited the court — which has been adopted in 20 schools serving 14 different communities — with helping to reduce the reported levels of typically teen-related crimes like shoplifting and vandalism.

The only shortfall of the system, according to Jeremiah, is that it's too small to handle the number of eligible students.

"The big problem we have is staff," Jeremiah said, agreeing with Kennedy when he said the team in place is tremendously overworked. On that day, there

were clearly more students waiting to have their cases heard than could be accommodated.

"That's what I'm looking forward to helping them address," Kennedy said. Calling for the court to become a national model, Kennedy said he'll be using his position on the House Appropriations Committee to ensure "enough funds are included in this year's budget to make more grants to programs such as this."

"This is about a lot more than just truancy," he said. "This program has the potential to prevent a lot of trouble down the road. It's intuitive. You know from common sense that what Judge Jeremiah is talking about is true."

Help from Kennedy can't come soon enough for Magistrate Buccipaulhus, whose

unofficial motto, "Have robe, will travel," sums up her frantic schedule.

Illustrating the need for staffing increases, Buccipaulhus pressed Kennedy into service as an impromptu translator in a case where the mother of a student spoke only Spanish.

On top of the 42 cases to be heard in Pawtucket, Buccipaulhus, who served for 10 years as a prosecutor of juveniles in the attorney general's office, had an afternoon session scheduled in West Warwick.

Students who are absent without a legitimate excuse for more than 10 days in the course of a school year have the option of enrolling in the truancy court program or taking their chances in the Family Court system.

Statewide, 429 students are enrolled in the system. More

than half of them are between the ages of 13 and 15.

Typically, truant students are required to appear before the court at regular intervals, as often as once a week, and are required to not only improve their attendance record, but also receive favorable behavior and work ethic reports from their teachers.

Penalties for students who fail to keep their end of the deal range from detention to community service to, in extreme cases, placement in a foster home or the state training school.

Parents are required to attend the truancy hearings and can also be held accountable for their children's truancy, facing possible penalties and fines and jail time for failing to get their children to school regularly.